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The Politics of Race and Class in the Age of Obama

Myra Mendible

Post-Racial America: New Myth for a New Age?

- 1 Bridging the partisan divide in Washington and forging a more united, “post-racial” America were defining themes of Barack Obama’s first presidential campaign. Yet despite the evocative power of his “post-race” narrative—which, incidentally, complements the nation’s myth of meritocracy—Obama’s election has not produced a more perfect union. In fact, America’s first black president finds himself presiding over a deeply polarized citizenry. Throughout the 2008 campaign season, anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim, and anti-“foreigner” rhetoric fueled angry town hall meetings; aroused suspicions about Obama’s citizenship status; and turned the race for the presidency into a mythic battle between “real” Americans and socialists and terrorists.¹ As the next presidential campaign heats up, news of gridlock in Washington and discontent on Main Street dominates the headlines. An appealing narrative of “post racial” harmony may have swayed the 2008 election Obama’s way, but it is the language of fear and suspicion that exerts influence in its wake and threatens Obama’s chance at a second term.
- 2 This essay considers the so-called “Obama effect”² as a discursive shift that revises and misappropriates identity politics. My analysis focuses attention on differentiation processes that disguise racialist ideology by disavowing or inverting a conventional black/white paradigm. In particular, I examine the deployment of three principle selfing/othering strategies in the age of Obama: the resurgence of code words for “race”; the reconfiguration of “passing” tropes in political discourse; and the emergence of “whiteness” as an endangered identity. I hope to show that these rhetorical sleights-of-hand exploit post-racial discourse in order to dismantle decades of progressive civil rights legislation in the United States.

- 3 Stuart Hall theorizes national identity as a discourse that shapes our collective self-image and encourages us to act in certain ways. These “shared meanings” align individuals with others and with a broader set of desirable qualities. In Hall’s view, discursive strategies are “how a national culture functions as a source of cultural meanings, a focus of identification, and a system of representation” (*Modernity* 615). While these strategies help us imagine similarities and affiliations, Hall argues that identity is discursively constructed primarily through difference. Rather than being “gradually subsumed” within national identity, ethnic and racial difference entails “the binding and marking of symbolic boundaries, the production of ‘frontier effects’” (“Introduction” 2). This discursive construction of difference continues and even intensifies when the national self feels threatened or vulnerable, as is the case in post 9/11 America.
- 4 Obama’s election exposed the fault lines of American society, evoking deep-seated apprehensions about race, immigration, and America’s status in a post-9/11 world. Despite his attempts to bypass race as a factor and not alienate his white constituency, Obama’s presidency has been to some degree hijacked by race. It can even be said that his election further obscured institutional racism and galvanized a racist backlash. As race historian David Roediger points out, “Obama does not represent the triumph of an advancing anti-racist movement but rather the necessity, at the highly refracted level of electoral politics, of abandoning old agendas, largely by not mentioning them” (*How Race Survived*). This suggests that Obama’s election actually facilitated a counter-discourse that obscures or downplays the persistence of inequality and racism and idealizes the current state of race relations in America. In 2009, almost 2 out of 3 white Americans (61.3 percent) surveyed said that blacks have now achieved racial equality; 21.5 percent believe that they will soon achieve it (Bobo 29). Thus “the overwhelming fraction of white Americans sees the post-racial moment as effectively here (83.8 percent)” despite evidence to the contrary (Bobo 29).
- 5 The fact that Americans elected a mixed race president presumably means that we have “moved beyond” race and its discontents. Any mention of systemic inequalities or lingering hostilities can now be easily discounted by pointing to the fact that the son of an American white woman and a Kenyan Muslim was elected president of the United States. Post-race discourse here serves to bolster the claims of capitalist meritocracy: the only barrier to individual wealth and success is a poor work ethic or some other character flaw. As Roediger notes in an interview,

If you accept the idea that racism is a personal failing, his election will show that a lot of people have overcome that personal failing, and I wouldn’t dismiss that. I think it is an important fact about the United States. But it’s not a fact that changes the fact of wholesale inequality or wholesale incarceration of black and brown people. Those won’t change as a result of the election.³
- 6 One need only consider conservative radio talk-show host and former Secretary of Education for President Reagan, Bill Bennett, who remarked that Obama’s election should mean an end to “excuse-making” by people of color: “Well, I’ll tell you one thing [Obama’s win] means...You don’t take any excuses anymore from anybody who says, ‘The deck is stacked, I can’t do anything, there’s so much in-built this and that.’”⁴ This is the same Bill Bennett who once told a caller on his radio show that a sure way to reduce crime would be to “abort every Black baby in this country.”⁵
- 7 But if race is no longer an “easy” bogeyman in the age of Obama, it is certainly no less productive of difference. In this context, deferring and recoding “race” allows it to do its

discursive work. Code words for race first surfaced during the Civil Rights Movement, when America's racial and ethnic hierarchies faced strong challenges. Christopher Hitchens explains that, "As the 1960s advanced, [racist language] became less respectable and, with the defection of white Southerners to the Republican Party, more a matter of codes and signals." After Obama's election, some of his political opponents adapt self-congratulatory rhetoric about America's racial progress, even as they revive the use of "code words" to de-legitimize Obama's presidency. The same fear-mongering tactics apply, but these strategic invocations of difference rarely mention "race" outright.

- 8 Code words achieve their intended effect by arousing the same kinds of anxieties that "blackness" does in a racist, but without implicating the speaker in *racism*. Overtly invoking fear or suspicion by mentioning President Obama's racial difference would offend some voters' sensibilities. Recoding and deferral allow opponents to differentiate and demonize Obama's "difference" without directly alluding to race. Instead, symbolic national boundaries are forged and maintained by recoding Obama's racial difference to signify an indeterminate otherness, a threatening "non-Americanness" that calls into question his legal and cultural right to be president of the United States. Deferring reference to the longstanding duologue of white and black, the discourse of "Americanness" in the age of Obama invokes "patriotic" themes associated with historically Anglo-American myths of cultural belonging. This discourse repeatedly pines for a return to so-called "traditional American values" and for a time when America ruled the world proudly and "without apology." It invokes an imagined community united by religious (Judeo-Christian) and economic (capitalist/free market) kinship. Differentiating Obama here depends on excluding him from these foundational narratives—portraying him as an outsider who holds no authentic ties to "American" history or values. He is someone who "doesn't believe in American exceptionalism" (Blackwell).⁶ Hillary Clinton's chief strategist, Mark Penn, promoted this view during the 2008 campaign: "I cannot imagine America electing a president during a time of war who is not at his center fundamentally American in his thinking and in his values," Penn wrote. He thus proposed targeting Obama's "lack of American roots" (qtd. in Dickerson).
- 9 This charge extends into another set of coded messages that draw on familiar stereotypes of African-American such as the "coon" "Sambo" or "Uncle Tom" to suggest that Obama lacks the dignity or status to represent America on the world stage. In 2009, when President Obama attended the G-20 summit in London, controversy ensued over Obama's supposed bow before Saudi King Abdullah. A *Washington Times* editorial called it a "shocking display of fealty to a foreign potentate" and a "servile gesture" that ran contrary to American tradition.⁷ In 2010, another caricature making the rounds online continues the Obama-as-subservient theme: it depicts the Harvard-educated black president as a shoe shine boy polishing Sarah Palin's shoes.⁸ Issues of "Tea Party Comix," circulated and sold online by its creator, Tom Kalb, featured a series of Obama-as-coon caricatures. Defending himself against the charge of racism, Kalb responded,

The accusation of 'Hate' is true, but it is the hate of an IDEOLGY [sic], not a of race of people..... I understand that the ideology has captured 80 or 90% of the race(s) in question, but it is STILL AN IDEOLOGY and NOT a "race" that this comic book attacks."⁹
- 10 Other images culling negative stereotypes of black men go even farther in "coding" Obama's threat, linking the president to images of the black "gangsta" or thug. One goes so far as to imagine Obama as black rapist; it shows a nude Lady Liberty sitting on the edge of a bed weeping as a smiling Obama says, "Oh stop your whining. You gave all the

consent I'll ever need November 2008." When asked about her cartoon, conservative blogger Darleen Click denied any racist intent: "This is supposed to be a post-racial era. Then deal with the fact that the President of the United States is the head of a gang that just raped our American principles."¹⁰

- 11 Recoding race often involves eliciting associations that are deeply rooted in long-standing economic inequalities in the US, which as Lawrence Bobo contends, make "blackness synonymous with the very bottom of the class structure" (17). Bobo rightly points out that poverty rates "do not fully capture the cumulative and multidimensional nature of black economic disadvantage" (19). This includes high rates of unemployment and incarceration, family break-up, and substandard schools and housing. Yet "post race" discourse as deployed for political gain endorses "color blind" policies that rely on what Bobo calls "laissez faire" racism (15). A continuing and widening wealth gap between whites and blacks is attributed not to enduring structural constraints or conditions but to "lack of motivation and will-power" (25). This generates wide support for conservative social policies that favor "color blind" criteria and contributes to the resentment many whites feel "toward the demands or grievances voiced by African Americans and the expectation of governmental redress" (28).
- 12 Attributing black poverty or unemployment rates to blacks' laziness, criminality, or willingness to "scam" the system, this tactic distinguishes "hard working Americans" (read: whites) from those "others" who lack the traditional "Protestant work ethic" that is central to WASP culture in America. Ronald Reagan famously chided "welfare queens" during his presidency, and Hillary Clinton revived these associations when she ran against Obama: "I have a much broader base to build a winning coalition on," she told a *USA Today* reporter. Clinton then cited Sen. Obama's weak "support among working, hard-working Americans, white Americans."¹¹
- 13 During the 2012 presidential campaign, Newt Gingrich echoed his 1994 Contract with America, which targeted federal food stamp entitlement programs for elimination. At a Fox News-Wall Street Journal sponsored debate in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina, he referred to President Obama as "the best food stamp president in history," culling associations between the black president and entitlement programs. Relying on racist stereotypes that attribute blacks' economic status to laziness or lack of willpower, Gingrich asserted the difference between "them" (Obama and the 95% of blacks who supported him in the first election) and "us" (a majority white Republican audience, and by extension, "real" i.e. "hard working" Americans): "We believe in work. We believe people should learn to work and that we're opposed to dependency."¹² Despite the fact that most recipients of federal food aid are children, elderly, and severely disabled persons and that only 22% of all food stamp recipients are black, Gingrich was able to exploit assumptions and familiar stereotypes for effect—eliciting a standing ovation in the process.

"Passing" for "Black"?

- 14 Ironically, Obama is in this way suspected of a kind of "passing" that does not overtly involve his race: the president of the United States is seen as "passing" as an American Christian capitalist. "Passing" most commonly refers to the practice of concealing of one's racial identity. In the post-Civil American South, "passing" as white was the only way that a light skinned African-American man or woman could gain access to the

privileges, citizenship, and freedoms granted whites. But in the more complicated, dynamic identity politics of America today, “Americanness” is less bound to “whiteness” exclusively than to its affiliations and associations. The slippery semantics at play in these gestures first surfaced in the charge made by black Republican Alan Keyes when he ran against Obama in the Illinois Senate race years earlier; in this context it was not that Obama was “too black” (i.e. “African”). Keyes denounced Obama for not being the descendant of slaves and therefore not “‘truly’ black.”

- 15 These semantic switches often result in absurd leaps in logic and contradictory assertions. More recently, *National Review*’s Victor Davis Hanson contrasted Herman Cain’s “authentic” blackness with President Obama’s:

Herman Cain is authentically African-American and of an age to remember the Jim Crow South; Obama, the son of an elite Kenyan and a white graduate student, came of age as a Hawaiian prep-schooler, whose civil-rights credentials are academic.¹³

- 16 In this case, Obama’s stellar academic background and success, qualities that would usually link him to one of America’s myth of meritocracy, are used to disassociate him from the American self. The assumption underlying this skewed logic is that “real” blacks in America are lower class and uneducated.

- 17 These rhetorical moves position Obama at the “frontiers” of a legitimated or “authentic” identity – neither black nor white, neither European nor truly American. This dread of Obama’s undifferentiated Otherness was expressed by one man in Mobile, Alabama who told a *New York Times* reporter, “[Obama’s] neither-nor. He’s other. It’s in the Bible. Come as one. Don’t create other breeds.”¹⁴ But it is at its most ludicrous in Dinesh D’Souza’s *Forbes* article, “How Obama Thinks.” At the outset, D’Souza aligns Obama with a Third World “anti-colonialist” agenda that is meant to signal allegiance to an “anti-American” politics. But D’Souza does not simply suggest an ideological difference; D’Souza ascribes to Obama an almost supernatural Otherness. First D’Souza situates Obama within the discourse of “foreignness” by noting (incorrectly) that he spent “his formative years... off the American mainland, in Hawaii, Indonesia, and Pakistan, with multiple subsequent journeys to Africa” (later acknowledging that Obama never lived in Pakistan). Despite the fact that Obama was raised by his white mother and grandparents, D’Souza sees in Obama the reincarnation of his father, “a Luo tribesman.... a philandering, inebriated African socialist.” It is this threatening, otherworldly influence that D’Souza claims is “now setting the nation’s agenda.” D’Souza writes (presumably with a straight face), that through his father

Obama learned to see America as a force for global domination and destruction. He came to view America’s military as an instrument of neocolonial occupation. He adopted his father’s position that capitalism and free markets are code words for economic plunder. Obama grew to perceive the rich as an oppressive class, a kind of neocolonial power within America.

- 18 D’Souza ends with an ominous question about Obama’s “dream” for America: “What is his dream? Is it the American dream? Is it Martin Luther King’s dream? Or something else?” Whatever this ambiguously foreign President’s “dream,” D’Souza warns his readers, it is “certainly not the American dream as conceived by the founders.” Obama’s racial difference here dissolves into a threatening hybridity: disconnected from America’s historical narrative of racial progress (“Martin Luther King’s dream of a color-blind society”) as well as from its justificatory myth of expansionism, Obama is *alienated*—cut off from any link to American history or culture. He is an anti-capitalist, anti-American foreign other who cannot even claim an “authenticated” American blackness. As Newt

Gingrich mused in response to what he referred to as D'Souza's "stunning insight" about Barack Obama: "What if [Obama] is so outside our comprehension, that only if you understand Kenyan, anti-colonial behavior, can you begin to piece together [his actions]?" (qtd. in Costa)

- 19 Criticism of the President often involves this amorphous "Othering" process: references to Obama's "questionable" birth certificate raise doubts about whether he was "really" born in America; allusions to his "Kenyan father" the "Luo tribesman" arouse suspicions about Obama's "Africanness"; use of the word "socialist" in conjunction with any policy Obama proposes, regardless of how "centrist" or moderate or capitalist, spooks middle-class Americans into opposing what might benefit them economically; and opportune uttering of his middle name, Hussein, works to denote Muslim or Middle Eastern affiliations with all that entails in post-9/11 America. These sorts of subtle racial cues have an impact on political elections: research published by Valentino, Hutchings, and White in *American Political Science Review*, for example, shows that subtle racial cues in campaign communications activates racial attitudes that affect political decision-making. Thus distortion and misinformation persist, circulated via popular conservative media outlets, talk radio, internet blogs, and even prominent political leaders. Not surprisingly, a Harris poll conducted in March of 2010 shows that 67% of Republicans believe Obama is a socialist, another 57% that he is a Muslim, and 45% that he was not born in the United States and is therefore ineligible for the presidency.¹⁵
- 20 This need to position Obama as somehow "outside" the parameters of what is legitimately "American" was on display throughout the 2008 presidential campaign, though during that contest Senator John McCain corrected an audience member who referred to Obama as a Muslim. Yet during the 2012 campaign stop in Florida, GOP presidential hopeful Rick Santorum smiled and nodded as a woman in the audience told him, "I never refer to Obama as President Obama because legally he is not [president].... He is an avowed Muslim and my question is, why isn't something being done to get him out of government? He has no legal right to be calling himself president."¹⁶ When questioned about his silence in the face of this factually inaccurate and offensive claim, Santorum responded, "I don't feel it's my obligation every time someone says something I don't agree with to contradict them." Further fueling fears of Obama's otherness, Santorum told audiences at Columbus, Ohio campaign stop: Obama's agenda is "not about you. It's not about your quality of life. It's not about your jobs. It's about some phony ideal. Some phony theology. Oh, not a theology based on the Bible. A different theology."¹⁷
- 21 Obama was born in Hawaii in 1961 and did not even visit Kenya until 1987, but this has not stopped some prominent conservatives from attributing his "difference" to his Kenyan ancestry. James Mann coined the phrase the "Kenya paranoia" in reference to this phenomenon. But Mann is "not talking here about simply the ideas of Republicans, the right wing or the political fringes. Rather, the Kenya paranoia has been showing up in the politest society, among journalists and even high-ranking diplomats." Mann argues that this "paranoia" about Obama's "difference" is not even restricted to Americans: a British television reporter wanted to interview Mann about Obama's views of the world because, "'He has different roots than all other presidents,' the reporter said. 'He doesn't have ties to Europe.'" Mann points to the irony of this assumption that Obama is not "European" enough—despite a white mother with British ancestry. Similarly, former Arkansas governor and twice GOP presidential candidate Mike Huckabee attributes Obama's "difference" to his "having grown up in Kenya" (an untruth that forced his

political action committee spokesman, Hogan Gidley, to explain that “the governor... wasn't talking about the president's place of birth -- the governor believes the president was born in Hawaii”). We should note the use of the word “believes” rather than “knows,” as if Obama’s citizenship was simply a matter of belief.¹⁸

- 22 In lieu of a discourse that “fixes” Obama’s otherness within a definable, familiar black/white framework, post-race discourse deployed during the presidential campaigns turns our attention from a history of US racial struggle that endures in the present. As Bobo points out, much post-racial rhetoric proclaims the irrelevance of the traditional black-white divide in an age when Americans are embracing hybridity and mixed ethnoracial identities (14). There has certainly been much ado about the changing demographics of the US, sometimes accompanied by ominous predictions about the “disappearing” white race. But as Bobo cautions, “we should be mindful that the level of ‘discussion’ and contention around mixture is far out of proportion to the extent to which most Americans actually designate and see themselves in these terms” (15). But with the black/white racial divide (rhetorically) situated in America’s past, Obama’s opponents can recode a racial binary into an ideologically framed opposition between “us” (“real” Americans of all colors) and “him” (an amalgam of all that is alien, potentially dangerous, and foreign). This discourse reframes historical events and struggles, drawing from terms that had served to champion civil rights legislation and deploying them to protect and privilege “whiteness.”¹⁹

Is White the New Black?

- 23 Interestingly, while “blackness” is deflected and deferred, “whiteness” is that which can now be spoken. Of particular interest is how “identity politics,” once primarily a concern of women of color, postcolonial critics, and other oppositional groups, has become a mainstream pastime in the age of Obama. In an election cycle that saw unprecedented participation by women, Latinos, and African Americans both as voters and candidates — “race” (closely aligned with “gender”) was bound to be a major topic of conversation. But “race” in mainstream American culture is usually coded as a referent for “non-white” people, a way of speaking about “them” (African Americans and other ethnic minorities). Since “whiteness” acts as the default setting, it typically remains unspoken and unacknowledged by whites themselves. As the philosopher Lewis Gordon puts it, to be non-white is to be racialized, while “To be raceless is to be ‘pushed up toward whiteness’” (122). It is the “invisible universal,” the “norm” that need not be spoken. Ironically, as “blackness” is sidelined in the interest of unity, it is “whiteness” that takes center stage. “White” identity was fretted over, pointed to, and talked about throughout the campaigns. Most significantly, through a rhetorical sleight-of-hand, a longstanding racial hierarchy was inverted (if only symbolically): “whiteness” emerged in public discourse as a political liability and “blackness” as a privileged site. Especially ironic is that even as Obama’s election is used by pundits and politicians alike as evidence of Americans’ post-race colorblindness, “whiteness” crops up as an endangered identity.
- 24 During the campaigns, such transcoding was in evidence on the Democratic side when Geraldine Ferraro attributed Obama’s success to his being black, noting that “if Obama was a white man, he would not be in this position.”²⁰ In this reversal of white privilege, Hillary Clinton was imagined as the “victim” of black male popularity. Similarly, John Edwards often played the underdog during the campaign, making self-deprecating

remarks about being a “white” male. The news media pursued the white-as-disadvantage storyline, one news anchor even asking Edwards, “What is a white male to do running against these historic candidacies?” (Jaffe). There were also blatant, repeated appeals to “white” women by both Sarah Palin and Hillary Clinton, while political pundits tracked, scrutinized, and obsessed over the “white working class voter.” Later, the Republican bid for Hillary’s supporters focused on “white women” who were expected to switch their vote to Palin not because of any ideological affiliation but merely on the basis of mutual “white femaleness.”

- 25 This pattern continues in post-Obama political culture to the point of absurdity, as when Fox TV commentator Glenn Beck accused the half-white Obama of harboring a “deep-seated hatred of white people.”²¹ In the presumably “post-race” age of Obama, white U.S.-born citizens are said to be an “oppressed majority” (in Rush Limbaugh’s words). This discourse has fueled paranoia and inspired the formation of various anti-immigrant and white supremacist groups. Since Obama’s election, membership in anti-immigrant groups has “risen from around 40 in 2005 to over 250 today” (Arana). The Southern Poverty Law Center notes “a dramatic resurgence in the Patriot movement and its paramilitary wing, the militias.... an astonishing 363 new Patriot groups appeared in 2009...a 244% jump” (Potok). The Center’s “Intelligence Report” in spring of 2010 warns of increasing violence:

Since the installation of Barack Obama, right-wing extremists have murdered six law enforcement officers. Racist skinheads and others have been arrested in alleged plots to assassinate the nation’s first black president. One man from Brockton, Mass. — who told police he had learned on white supremacist websites that a genocide was under way against whites — is charged with murdering two black people and planning to kill as many Jews as possible on the day after Obama’s inauguration. Most recently, a rash of individuals with antigovernment, survivalist or racist views have been arrested in a series of bomb cases. (Potok)

- 26 Even the Tea Party Movement, whose leaders claim is the result of grass-roots, populist anger by both blacks and whites, often resorts to this white-as-disadvantaged rhetoric. A racial subtext often frames speeches at Tea Party events. Tom Tancredo, a former Republican Representative, railed during a Tea Party Convention that “People who could not even spell the word ‘vote’ or say it in English put a committed socialist in the White House,” echoing the kind of discourse that justified literacy tests meant to suppress the black votes in the US under Jim Crow. He went on to blame Obama’s election on “the cult of multiculturalism.”²² This “anti-government” movement, which gained momentum only after Obama’s election, is an increasingly visible and vocal presence in US politics.
- 27 The appeal to shared “whiteness” is a means of social control as old as the idea of “whiteness” itself. It works to subvert economic and social alliances that could pose a challenge to the status quo. Direct appeals to the “white working class” foster divisions and even antagonisms between poor whites and other oppressed or disenfranchised groups. As historian Edmund Morgan shows, in 1600s British North America, indentured Europeans and enslaved Africans “initially saw each other as sharing the same predicament. It was common, for example, for servants and slaves to run away together, steal hogs together, get drunk together....White, black and native workers, bonded and free, cooperated to counter the harsh class oppression of the plantation elite” (327). Chip Smith cites the wealth of court records that “testify to the many instances of cooperation and solidarity among servants” (17). He argues that the threat of uprisings posed by a united labor class led to the privileging of “white” laborers over Africans: “[O]nce this system of white racial oppression took hold in the South—once the white race came into

existence--Southern white workers never again rose up against the plantation system. White people's anger... targeted the slaves as the cause of their misery rather than the slave system and its white ruling class (21).

Exploiting the "Obama Effect"

- 28 During his presidential campaign, Obama did his best to avoid the "elephant in the room": the enduring inequalities and divisions between "white" America and its others. He rarely addressed racial inequality, and with the exception of a major speech devoted to the issue of race, focused scant attention on issues of concern to African American constituents in particular. Despite unemployment rates among African Americans almost double that of whites and an increasing wealth divide between whites and blacks during the recession, Obama has also been muted in his responses to these troublesome trends as President.²³ The median wealth of white households is now about 20 times that of black households and 18 times that of Hispanic ones, the largest wealth gap since the government began publishing this data in the 1970s and about twice the ratios that had prevailed in the two decades prior to 2009.²⁴ Obama's tacit "post-race" stance, which in this case means ignoring the racial implications of economic recession, has cost him the support of some African American leaders. But it helps him to skirt the divisive issue of race by appearing to "transcend" it as President.
- 29 Conservative leaders have filled in the gaps left by Obama's silence. Obama's reticence may be intended to deflect the impression that he "favors" black or minority constituents, but it has served as tacit endorsement for presumably "color-blind" policies. This post-race political discourse bolsters calls for the elimination of race-based affirmative action programs in the US, programs that have served the interests of working class and minority populations as well as white women. While conservatives have long advocated abolishing racial quotas and other policies enacted after the Civil Rights movement, Obama's election has been used as evidence that these are no longer needed, despite the fact that white females account for a majority of affirmative action's beneficiaries since the policies were implemented in the early 1970s (Hartmann). For example, the conservative think tank, "Center for Equal Opportunity" (CEO) has an agenda that seems contrary to the notion identified with "equal opportunity," a term associated with policies aimed at ending discrimination against blacks and other minorities. One of CEO's stated missions is to eliminate affirmative action admissions policies at universities across the nation, policies instituted to increase minority student access to higher education. Roger Clegg, president of the Center for Equal Opportunity, claims that his group is "not against diversity; we are against discrimination." But discrimination in Clegg's "color blind" approach refers to discrimination against whites. CEO recently targeted a number of universities that consider diversity one factor among others in their admissions process. Most recently, the University of Wisconsin at Madison was the subject of a scathing CEO report alleging preferential admissions of blacks and "severe" racial discrimination. The fact that blacks made up only 2.6 percent of the student body admitted to UW-Madison in 2008 while 85.5 percent of incoming students were white somehow suggests that whites are a disadvantaged group.²⁵
- 30 As Smith, King, and Klinkner have argued, Obama's election seemed to mark the beginning of an era "after which racial inequalities and conflicts would no longer be central to national life" (121). Yet the ongoing debate between "color-blind" and "race-

conscious” policies and programs suggests that we have yet to resolve the issue of how to address race-based inequalities. The prospect of forming coalitions that can reach across party lines and forge effective compromises seems bleak in the current political landscape:

Today, partisan division and racial alliance divisions are almost coextensive: the Republicans regularly endorse color-blind policies, while Democrats support race-conscious ones. Even though the issues that define our current racial era seem more amenable to reasonable compromises...this structural reinforcement of racial/partisan positions has contributed to a decisively polarized politics in which resolving racial issues is a mammoth task. (122)

- 31 The promise implicit in Obama’s successful 2008 candidacy makes the divisiveness and hostility that plagues his presidency especially troubling. Given America’s racial history, there is little doubt that his election suggests that a more fluid, negotiable American identity is now possible, and that the walls that kept African American men and women out of the higher echelons of political power are, if not obliterated, at least crumbling. There is also reason to celebrate the effect that this election may have on black youth, who may see reflected in Barack Obama’s success, a model for their own aspirations. The “hope” and “change” message that Obama represents still resonates among many, and it may eventually foster a more honest and nuanced discussion about race. But the case for a “post-race” America in the age of Obama still seems less grounded in a genuinely “color-blind” politics than in the art of deflection and disavowal. As a result, tangible domestic policy changes implemented as a result of the Civil Rights Movement could be repealed as a result. In the end, much will depend on the extent to which Americans allow racism to masquerade as progress.

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NOTES

1. In March of 2010, Republican National Committee fundraising plans harnessed these suspicions of Obama, calling for an aggressive campaign capitalizing on "fear" of President Obama and socialism. Interestingly, a copy of the presentation was left in a hotel hosting the \$2,500-a-head Republican fundraising retreat. See <<http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0310/33866.html#ixzz0kFaqyPpn>>
2. The election of an African American as president has been credited or blamed for a variety of seismic changes in America's sociopolitical landscape, giving rise to the term "Obama Effect." The term has been used disparagingly (as in the Citizens United film, *Hype: The Obama Effect*) or approvingly (as in Ray Friedman's Vanderbilt University study suggesting that Obama's election may help reduce the test achievement gap between Blacks and Whites). See Harris, Moffitt, and Squires for interdisciplinary analyses of the "Obama effect."

3. Roediger, David. "Obama's Success Not a Sign that U.S. has Overcome Race Issue, Historian Says." Illinois News Bureau, Office of Public Affairs, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. 11 Sept. 2008. <<http://news.illinois.edu/NEWS/08/0911race.html>>
4. see <http://stuffwhitepeopledo.blogspot.com/2008/11/play-race-doesnt-matter-anymore-card.html>
5. September 28, 2005 broadcast of Salem Radio Network's *Bill Bennett's Morning in America*. [Transcript] <<http://mediamatters.org/mmtv/200509280006>>
6. For examples of "conspiracy theories" aligned with this line of thinking, see Blackwell and Klukowski (2010); Klein and Elliott (2010).
7. "Barack Takes a Bow." 7 April 2009. Web. 2 February 2012. www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/apr/7/barack-takes-a-bow/
8. For a look at several "coon" images, their racist roots, and their revival during Obama's presidency, see <<http://www.authentichistory.com/diversity/african/3-coon/5-chickwatermelon/index.html>>
9. http://tpmmuckraker.talkingpointsmemo.com/2010/08/tea_party_comix_creator_speaks_theyre_not_racist_t.php
10. For a discussion of this criminalizing narrative and its historical links to racism, see Kay Whitlock's article, "Criminalizing President Obama." This essay includes links to various images and their historical correlates. <<http://criticalmassprogress.com/2012/02/15/ci-criminalizing-president-obama/>>
11. "Clinton Makes Case for Wide Appeal." *USA Today*. 8 May 2008. Web. January 4, 2012. <http://www.usatoday.com/news/politics/election2008/2008-05-07-clintoninterview_N.htm>
12. See "Gingrich Swipes at Food Stamps." <http://www.miamiherald.com/2012/01/23/2604256/gingrichs-swipes-at-food-stamps.html>
13. "Cain Lost in the Labyrinth: Cain's authenticity versus Obama's metrosexual cool." *National Review Online*. November 9, 2011. Web. 2 February 2012. <http://www.nationalreview.com/blogs/print/282643>
14. Stephen Ducat. "Why They Hate Obama." 26 October 2008. Web. 8 January 2012. <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/stephen-ducat/why-they-hate-obama-misce_b_137935.html>
15. <http://news.harrisinteractive.com/profiles/investor/ResLibraryView.asp?BzID=1963&ResLibraryID=37050&Category=1777>
16. See <<http://nation.foxnews.com/president-obama/2012/01/23/woman-calls-obama-avowed-muslim-santorum-town-hall>>
17. See Samuel Jacobs, "Santorum Says Obama Theology not Based on Bible." 12 February 2012. Web. February 25, 2012. <<http://news.yahoo.com/santorum-says-obama-agenda-not-based-bible-224447037.html>>
18. <http://content.usatoday.com/communities/theoval/post/2011/03/huckabee-wrongly-says-obama-grew-up-in-kenya/1>
19. There are still, of course, blatantly racist images and claims circulating widely even in this presumably more "enlightened" post-Obama era. As Lawrence Bobo puts it, "At the same time that a nation celebrates the historic election of an African American president, the cultural production of demeaning antiblack images—post-cards featuring watermelons on the White House lawn prior to the annual Easter egg roll, Obama featured in loincloth and with a bone through his nose in ads denouncing the health care bill, a cartoon showing police officers shooting an out-of-control chimpanzee under the heading 'They'll have to find someone else to write the next stimulus bill'—are ugly reminders of some of the more overtly racialized reactions to the ascendancy of an African American to the presidency of the United States" (32).
20. See Reuters story online: <<http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSN1159673020080312>>
21. *Fox and Friends*, July 28, 2009.
22. See Kevin Hechtkopf, "Tom Tancredo Tea Party Speech Slams 'Cult of Multiculturalism.'"

CBS News. Feb. 5, 2010. Web. <http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544_162-6177125-503544.html>

23. According to a Bureau of Labor Statistics report issued in August of 2011, the unemployment rate for whites was 8.1% compared to 15.9% for blacks and 11.3% for Hispanics. <<http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empstat.nr0.htm>> Equally significant is the increasing wealth gap: according to the Pew research, inflation-adjusted median wealth fell by 66% among Hispanic households and 53% among black households from 2005 through 2009, compared with 16% in white households. <<http://www.politico.com/news/stories/0711/59902.html#ixzz1W46rMGEL>>

24. See complete Pew Research Report at <<http://pewsocialtrends.org/2011/07/26/wealth-gaps-rise-to-record-highs-between-whites-blacks-hispanics/?src=pp-footer>>

25. See Emily Wood, "Conservative Think Tank Undermines Diversity Efforts at UW-Madison." Sept. 16, 2011. Web. <http://campusprogress.org/articles/conservative_think_tank_undermines_diversity_efforts_at_uw-madison/>

ABSTRACTS

This essay explores the revival and misappropriation of identity politics in the age of Obama. I argue that Obama's presidency has exposed the fault lines of American society, evoking deep-seated apprehensions about race, immigration, and America's role in a post-9/11 world. As a result, it has generated a range of discursive strategies intended to both disguise and deploy racist ideology. In particular, my analysis focuses attention on three developments in the wake of Obama's election: the emergence of "whiteness" as an endangered identity; the prevalence of "class" as a code word for "race"; and the reconfiguration of "passing" and miscegenation tropes in political discourse. I consider the ways that these rhetorical sleights-of-hand exploit post-racial discourse in order to dismantle decades of progressive civil rights legislation in the United States.

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Keywords: identity politics, post-racial, race, Obama, discourse, legislation

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